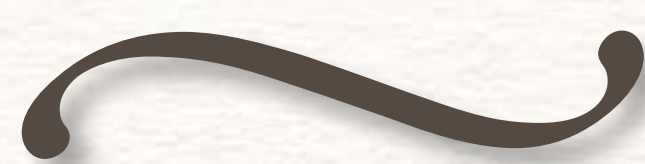


JOE SASAKI



A Brooks Jensen

A Brooks Jensen Arts Publication



With a free weekend, I pointed my rental car north from Chicago toward somewhere unknown. I needed to be in Milwaukee on Tuesday, but I had three days of photography before then.

Somewhere north of Milwaukee about sixty miles, I passed a farm off to my right that caught my eye. The machinery outside the building looked interesting, but I was cruising at 50 miles per hour and just drove on by. A few miles down the road, I admitted to myself that the place looked *really* interesting ... but I was too far passed it to go back. Another half dozen miles and the vision of *potential* started gnawing at me in earnest. Finally, at the intersection of county road Y and county road YY (I will resist the temptation to propose any philosophical symbolism about this) I came to the town of Leroy, Wisconsin and turned around. I drove back, turned down the driveway, walked up to Joe and introduced myself. We started talking and two days later, along with a couple dozen rolls of exposed film, we said goodbye and I drove away.





“Oh, dat. I don’t t’row dat away. We use dat yet. We can still make sumpin’ outta dis guy. You can make a collar outta dis one yet — bore the t’read out — cut dis flat — maybe cut deese here corners off yet.” He thought some more during a pause, “I could make a smaller nut outta dat yet, too. Never t’row anything away,” he advised, “you never know when you might need it.” There was another thoughtful pause after which he added, “Or if you’ll be able to find it.”

As evidence of this wisdom, he pointed toward the door. “I made dis here door handle outta ol’ beer tap.” Then he turned and slowly walked around the shop, more searching his mind than the nooks and crannies of his shelves. Finally, from off in the corner I heard, “Here’s dat leetle fart. I knew I had it somewheres.”





Eat it up. Wear it out. Make it do. Do without.

As a young boy, I first heard these words of advice from my grandfather. How foolish they seemed then, in my youth. I doubt if Joe had ever thrown away a tool in all his life. Screwdriver handles were now serving as lever controls. An old beer tap opened his front door. An ice pick was now a cotter key. I mentioned he was about due for some new gloves. "Aw dem sheets are okay, yet. Dere okay. I use dem for a rag when dey get too bad."



Dan, one of Joe's neighbors, came by to pick up an axle Joe had repaired. It had taken him three days of work to complete. "Oh, Joe can fix everything," he said admiring the new axle. Dan turned to me and began explaining Joe's work. "This thing here was built on a cast and when it came loose that cast iron all broke. Joe turned that piece out and made a steel one for me." Joe was over in the far side of the shop, but I could see he was listening. When Dan had finished his description Joe came over and added the final touches. "Den I couldn't hold the goddamn t'ing but I had enough on dere to machine it off and stick it on dere and cut dis out and den put dat in a chuck. Den I cut dis all back and stuck dis t'ing on and smoothed it out. Now it turns like new, only better. Oh, dem guys give me grey hair once in a while."

Fixing things was a point of pride with Joe. While I was in Chicago, I'd picked up a new recessed lens board for my view camera for use with a new wide angle lens I had with me. I mentioned to Joe that I wished I could use it now to make a photo of his shop. "Gimme dat dere t'ing and I can make it fit." Here he is drilling a hole for my lens. I used it for the photograph on the next page.



As we talked, a formation of Canada geese flew overhead and I mentioned how loud and how pretty they were. “Oh sheet dere here by da millions. Christ, when dey come da sky is all black with ‘em. Once an’ a while you’ll find a whole field black with geese. When, those leettle sheets come dis time of year you here ‘em first in this window and then they fade over to this window and that means dere headin’ north. It’s always nice when they come dat way.” He stared at me seriously as though he was teaching a great lesson. “But let me tell ya, when ya here ‘em outa this window an’ then over t’ this window they’re headin’ south. Den dere not so nice, cuz ya know.” Here was a man who reckoned the spinning of the earth, the very global change of seasons by the sounds of the geese outside his workshop window. His workshop, his yard, his house, and the other few people in Leroy was a world big enough to satisfy Joe for 73 years. Some might scoff at this and say his was a restricted life. I admire him for knowing the definition of “enough.”

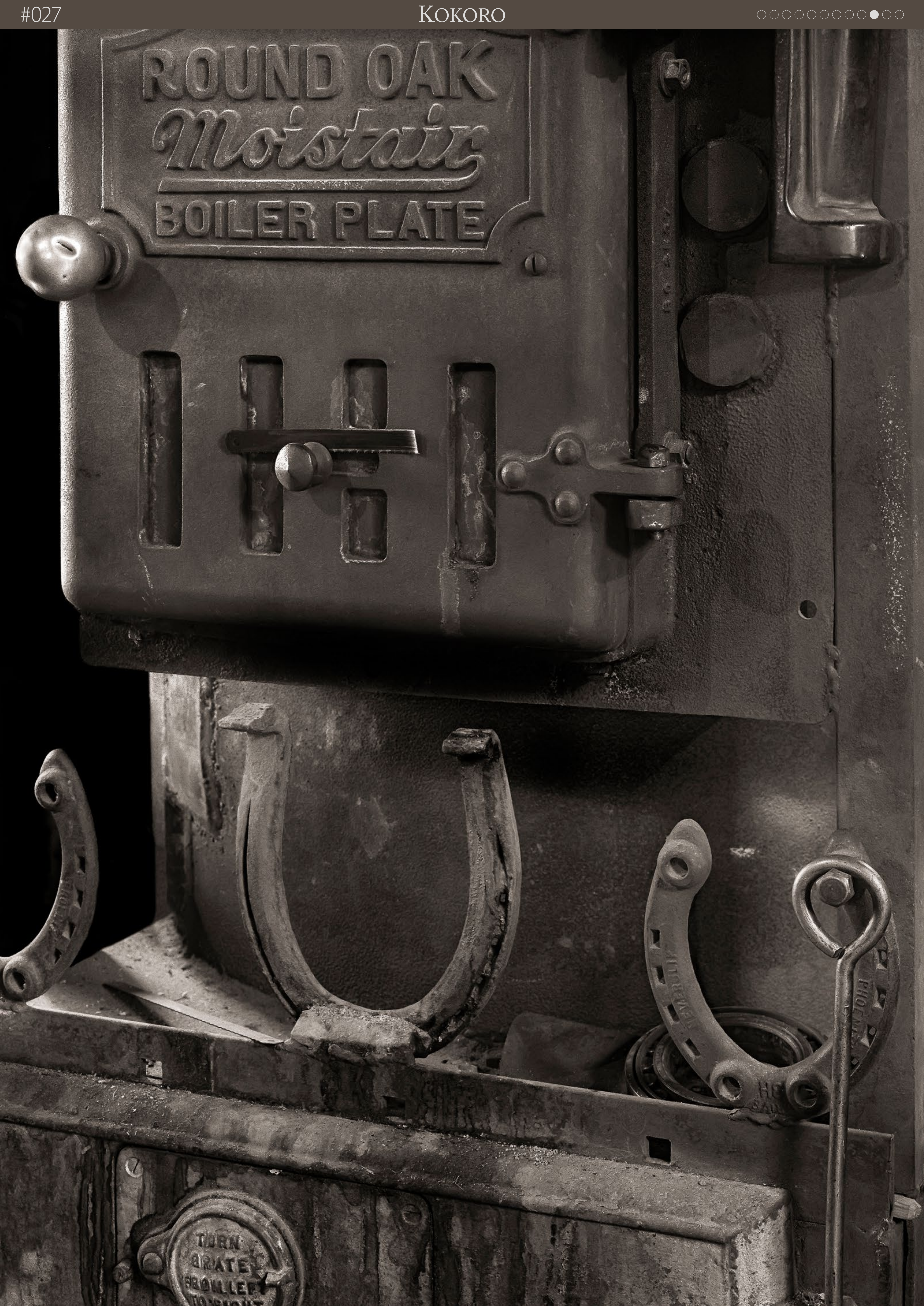
The Stove

"Oh sheet yes it gits cold — down twenty t'irty b'low zero outside. But, it's never cold in here." Our conversation had arrived at a bragging point. "Sheet, yeah. This t'ing gits started in October an' never goes out 'til summer. I come out here in the mornin' its sixty seventy degrees. I stand all my wood all up. Den I put a great big one on the bottom and den I giver a start an' shut evert'ing off. Sometimes I doan hafta put not'ing in til two t'ree o'clock in the afternoon."

Joe built the stove. The main belly was an old water main dug up in Milwaukee. The top came off a boiler from an old freighter. The grid was from an old Victrola. He welded it there one day after having burned his arm by absentmindedly leaning up against the stove to rest and warm himself. "Now ya can lean up dere an' stay toasty all day and never burn yurself no matter how hot th' fire is." I suspect it never occurred to Joe that, other than himself, this theory would never be tested.

"I used to have to put on my gloves to open the door cuz th' handle was so hot. I fine'ly got smart one day and put on this new handle I made outa th' top of a brass bed post." I suddenly had this image of the bed in his room missing one post top. To a man like Joe, the practicality of a cool stove handle is much more important than the cosmetic of his bed. After all, he would handle the stove door every day, but who would ever see his bed?







Joe had tools everywhere and all of them looked quite used. It was easy to see that tools were the man's life.

"All your tools are old, Joe."

"Yeah, but dey all work. The t'ing is, you know, you gotta know how to use it. You could have a brand new one and not do nuttin' with it. You can break it by doin' nuttin' with it. Tools was meant to be used. Sometimes I buy old tools just to save 'em."



Joe's expression left me doubting whether I was welcome or not. I soon learned to read Joe from his words and his actions rather than from his scowl. We spent two days together and were both sad when the time came for me to leave. He shook my hand and told me, "You come by anytime. I'll be right here." Two years later, I visited him again. True to his word, he was there.

"Where you been? I t'ought you mighta forgot about me."

No, Joe. I'll never forget you.



Brooks Jensen is a fine-art photographer, publisher, workshop teacher, and writer. In his personal work he specializes in small prints, hand-made artist's books, and digital media publications.

He and his wife (Maureen Gallagher) are the owners, co-founders, editors, and publishers of the award winning *LensWork*, one of today's most respected and important periodicals in fine art photography. With subscribers in 73 countries, Brooks' impact on fine art photography is truly world-wide. His long-running podcasts on art and photography are heard over the Internet by thousands every day. All 900+ podcasts are available at [LensWork Online](http://lensworkonline.com), the LensWork membership website. LensWork Publishing is also at the leading edge in multimedia and digital media publishing with *LensWork Extended* — a PDF based, media-rich expanded version of the magazine.

Brooks is the author of seven best-selling books about photography and creativity: *Letting Go of the Camera* (2004); *The Creative Life in Photography* (2013); *Single Exposures* (4 books in a series, random observations on art, photography and creativity); and *Looking at Images* (2014); as well as a photography monograph, *Made of Steel* (2012). His next book will be *Those Who Inspire Me (And Why)*. A free monthly compilation of of this image journal, [Kokoro](http://kokoro.com), is available for download.

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Anacortes, WA, U.S.A.

Email brooks@brooksjensenarts.com

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